

## Phuket by [girlinstory](#)

**Category:** IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

**Genre:** But they don't know that, Hurt Richie Tozier, Hurt/Comfort, IT Chapter Two Fix-It, It fix-it, M/M, No Major Character Death, Richie Tozier Whump

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Urís

**Relationships:** Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2019-12-03

**Updated:** 2019-12-12

**Packaged:** 2019-12-13 01:32:24

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence

**Chapters:** 9

**Words:** 6,345

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](#)

**Summary:**

Eddie comes to stay with Richie after the events of It Chapter Two, which makes it a lot harder for Richie to keep his secret.

It's not the one you think.

# 1. Chapter 1

Bill lived in a McMansion that Audra had helped him purchase after the unmitigated success of his film adaptation for *The Glittering*. Mike was still traveling the world, but he was doing it on Bill Denbrough's dime, so he was staying for months at a time in the nicest AirBnBs money could rent. Ben lived in a mansion that he had designed himself. Beverly was living with him, but she only took up, like, two feet, and that was after she'd had a big meal.

Richie's apartment was small, not because he couldn't afford more space, but because his square-footage seemed to be directly proportional to his loneliness.

So why the fuck did Eddie decide to stay with him?

"I can take the couch."

Eddie looked at him like crazy, which was fair. "Your couch is inflatable."

"More space!" said Richie. "It deflates during the day!"

"Because clearly space is your priority," said Eddie. "I thought you were, like, famous. Just how bad is your manager?"

"It's not that..." Richie shrugged, so he wouldn't have to finish that sentence, but Eddie just nodded.

"Well, we've shared a hammock. This should be fine."

Richie laughed, and it was only a little hysterical.

At least his apartment was in order (if you didn't count the hole he had punched in the bathroom door). For as long as he could afford it, Richie had employed a cleaning service, even though the only visitors he ever had were from the cleaning service.

Eddie led him to his own bedroom. (To be fair, the kitchen was part of the living room, and the bathroom had a picture of Jack Nicholson taped over the hole.)

"So what happened to the bathroom door?"

"Toy boating accident," said Richie. "Don't you want dinner or something first?"

"We're not sleeping together, Tozier."

"I kn— I just— I know you didn't eat on the plane."

"Actually I did. Most East Asian airlines have surprisingly healthy in-flight food, and Phuket just expanded to the continental U.S. after achieving great commercial success in Thailand."

"Phuket?"

"Yeah," said Eddie. "I don't think they'll do so great here."

Richie showered while Eddie put his own sheets on the bed, and then Eddie showered while Richie had a panic attack.

"No More Tears? Seriously, Richie?"

"Yeah, I know. Johnson & Johnson are liars. Both of them."

"We'll go shopping for adult hygiene products tomorrow," said Eddie. "Don't worry. I already have a list."

"I'm not," Richie lied. He wasn't worried about Eddie completely overhauling his shower caddy and/or life. They both needed it. He was more worried about what would happen when Eddie found out there wasn't much point in overhauling either. Not when—

"...be conditioning. A two-in-one is like a Playstation. It plays games and DVDs, but it doesn't do either well. Richie? ...Richie!"

"Sorry." Somehow they had ended up in bed. Richie would have hoped he hadn't done anything too embarrassing during his little dissociative episode, but his head was already on Eddie's shoulder. "I was just— Just talk to me."

"I was," said Eddie.

"I mean— So your firm has an LA branch?"

"I'm not falling for that one again."

"No! I really wanna' know."

So Eddie hesitantly began describing his transfer, growing more confident after Richie didn't fake snore through the first few sentences.

Maybe he could keep it a secret. Eddie was a nosy little bastard, but Richie had kept his deepest, darkest secret for almost forty years. Of course, he hadn't known Eddie for twenty-seven of those years, but—

"....are always spamming the office with their bake sales and ball sports, but I send one lousy email about Mr. Ratburn's wedding, and they call a meeting. They were trying to be so PC about it, but the Ops Manager kept calling it 'about the gay rat thing' and I know she's born-again Christian, so I guess... So I guess it's not working?"

Richie blinked. "Huh?"

"Wasn't it supposed to put you to sleep?"

"Oh," said Richie. "Yeah."

"What's wrong, Richie?" Eddie's brow furrowed even more than usual. It was adorable. It was definitely giving him wrinkles. Adorable wrinkles. "Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"No! No. I mean...Obviously not." Richie laughed. His head was still on Eddie's shoulder, and their legs were now tangled together.

"So what's wrong?"

"I'm dying."

Shit.

## 2. Chapter 2

The first time Richie thought he hit rock bottom, he was twenty-seven.

He was working for Saturday Night Live and his hair looked the best it ever had. Richie was the youngest guy SNL had in rotation, so he had to keep in shape for the Himbo roles. Some days, his only meal was vodka. He preferred bourbon, but clear alcohol had fewer calories. He used to have a healthy distrust of people who said they forgot to eat. Richie used to forget he was eating, until he looked down and saw all the empty ice cream cartons.

Now, when he wasn't sleeping, he was working, and when he wasn't working, he wasn't sleeping. His manager kept getting him bit roles in crap romcoms and gigs in the gradually-gentrified NYC standup scene. At least it made Bobby's diet plan gotten easier to follow.

The second time Richie thought he hit rock bottom, he was thirty-three.

Richie had moved from New York to LA. Now he was starring in the crap romcoms. His fans sent him jewelry, flowers, chocolates, marriage proposals, poetry, dead animals, and on one memorable occasion, a kidney. Pity it wasn't a liver, but the FBI probably would've confiscated it anyway. (His drinking problem had turned into a cocaine problem. He still drank; it just wasn't his biggest problem.)

Apparently, Richie was very big in Japan. He had everything he'd ever wanted. Except for sleep.

The third time Richie thought he hit rock bottom, he was forty. He'd just been handed bourbon and mints by a stagehand who should not have known him that well. The back of his mind was a new ticker of childhood memories, but mostly, he was grateful for the mints.

The fourth time Richie thought he hit rock bottom, he was still forty, and he actually hit his bottom on the rocky cistern of Its lair. He fell foot-first, but his feet gave way when his syndesmosis tendon tore,

and he fell backwards, somehow landing on both his head and ass. That was the fourth worst thing about being tall. Right after air travel and worrying about short people looking up his nostrils. Richie had owned and used a neti pot for twenty-seven years without knowing why.

When Richie really did hit rock bottom, he didn't think about it at all. He was too busy thinking, Oh, god, god, no, god, not him, not him, me, please, god, please—

Then he hit it again.

And again.

And again.

And—

### 3. Chapter 3

The Losers split up the day after they killed It.

There were wives, careers, and giant phallic effigies to get back to. There were abusive douchebags to divorce and endings to write. The Losers were adults, but even as children, they had been more realistic than their shared trauma of fighting a carnival tulpa from outer space would lead one to expect. It made sense for them to leave. There was nothing left to do in Derry. Nothing left to say. No words.

No letters.

It seemed too soon to everyone. Richie knew it wasn't just him, even though he was the only one without anything to get back to. He could feel the.... bad vibes from the moment they woke up. Richie hadn't heard the Losers get up, apart from one high-pitched giggle that might have been Bev, but was probably Bill. He could feel their collective energy, like a school hall during midterms.

Eddie was the only one still asleep. He was lying in bed next to Richie, because his room was a crime scene with a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. They weren't touching, except for the fingers circling Eddie's wrist like a bracelet, the clasp of fingertips resting on his pulse point.

Their scars were gone, like Christ, back from the dead. Mike's arm was still broken, so that sucked. His was the only injury (other than Richie's torn tendon, which he was expertly ignoring). Eddie still had his cheek wound, but Bowers wasn't a supernatural entity. He was just coerced by one.

Eddie had redressed the wound himself, after brushing his teeth. Richie was honestly impressed with how well Eddie had been handling his new and infectable orifice. What a fucking trooper. Of course, Myra probably wouldn't handle it so well, and her spiral would suck Eddie into a vortex of his own, but Richie was trying not to think about that.

He was trying not to think about his own life, and how little it still

seemed like one. Maybe he could get a fresh start too. There was nobody to divorce, but he could fire Bobby. That relationship had been toxic, even before the ipecac.

He was trying not to think about the white hair he'd found in the mirror when Eddie made him brush his teeth. Not even a hair. A whole lock, like the Bride of Frankenstein.

He was trying not to think about anything except for the gurgle of blood, going only where it belonged, right underneath his fingertips.

Richie wasn't in denial. He knew this couldn't last, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except—

Eddie opened his eyes, and Richie let go of his wrist.

"Hi." He blinked a few times, and Richie tried not to imagine Eddie fluttering his eyelashes. "What's up?"

It begged for a dick joke, but they were having a moment.

"The sun," said Richie.

"You think?" Eddie rolled his eyes. Apparently, only Richie was having a moment.

"I try not to."

"What?"

"Nothing." Richie smiled. "Let's get some breakfast."



## 4. Chapter 4

"What the fuck do you mean you're *dying*?"

When Richie got stressed, he vomited. When Eddie got stressed, he word-vomited, his patter so fast only auctioneers could follow.

"Is it cancer? Are you sick? Oh, god, is that why you keep throwing up? And losing hair? What stage is it at? What stage was it diagnosed at? Never mind. I'll ask your doctor. We're going to the hospital. Why aren't you putting on your coat?"

"I'm not sick."

Eddie's face unwrinkled just to wrinkle again, like Richie's forehead after Bobby bullied him into trying Botox.

Richie had an idea for a show he'd been fiddling with for a few months. It was a little derivative of *The Walking Dead*, but a lot less pedestrian.

Botox was the perfect origin story for a zombie apocalypse. Botulism was a toxin, but it also a paralytic— a preservative of sorts. The only people infected at first would be rich bitches and businessmen with sweaty handshakes. So no one would notice.

The working title was Headshot. Sometimes Richie thought about pitching it to Bobby, but then he sobered up.

"Richard Trashmouth Tozier, if this is your idea of a joke, I swear to god—"

"You got me." Richie wagged his eyebrows. "Although I love how willing you were to play doctor."

Eddie blushed. "You said you were dying."

"Jeez, Eds. Yes, I'm dying. Of hunger."

"Don't call me— What?"

"You may have had your Phuket, but I was busy putting up pictures of Jack Nicholson," said Richie. "There's one on the inside of the door too, so you have something to look at while you poop. You're welcome."

"I am never thanking you for that," said Eddie. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I did," said Richie, "and you assumed I had cancer."

"Well, next time don't say it like that!"

The room was dark, but Richie could feel Eddie flop back down so forcefully he made the mattress bounce, the sleepy equivalent of slamming a door. Cute, cute, *cute*.

"Go back to bed," said Richie. "I'll tell the delivery guy to text me so the doorbell doesn't wake you up."

"Don't you have food here?"

"Not real food," Richie said, forgetting for a moment that, even if Eddie couldn't see his face, the smile was still evident in his voice. "Just Keanu and acky berries."

"That's not how you pronounce either of— You shopped for me?" Eddie sounded surprised, but Richie didn't need to hear it. He didn't need to see it. No light, no glasses, blood rushing in his ears like they were pressed against a super-macabre seashell, and he could still read Eddie better than he had ever read a crowd. "Well, now I'm hungry too. You're frankly exhausting to live with. It's no wonder you're so skinny. Just don't order—"

"I can't hear you!" Richie was already out of bed and halfway down the hall.

"Thai food!"

"Paithoon! My man. How's Beau Thai treating you? See? I told you it would be a better fit than the Pad Pad. Yeah, but I got company, so two of the usual, except make one so mild you could air it on PBS. Oh, do you have mango and sticky rice? Great. Stick us up."

Eddie finally caught up, pulling one of Richie's sweaters on over his pajama set, which was frankly unfair.

"Goddamn it, Richie."

Richie shrugged, unapologetic. "You gave me a craving."

"I hate you."

"But it's a love-hate relationship, right?"

"Yes," said Eddie. "You love me, and I hate you."

Richie had to laugh at that.

It was funny, because it was true.

Eddie put on one of The Late Shows. Richie had been interviewed by the host last year, but he couldn't remember her name. It wasn't an insult to her. He had repressed.... pretty much every part of his life that wasn't already lost to clown-induced amnesia. The alcohol helped.

Richie started singing to himself, under his breath, unaware he was doing it.

*"I've got two chickens to paralyze*

*With the force of a great Thai food."*

A commercial came on. He couldn't tell what it was for, but a woman was moaning.

So probably yogurt.

*"Sweet dreams are made of cheese.*

*Who am I to disagree?*

*Travel the—"*

Eddie muted the next commercial. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Your concern is touching, Eds."

"Don't call me that." Eddie pulled a blanket over their laps. Technically, it was a Snuggie, but he didn't need to know that. "I'm not concerned about anything except being exposed to your germs."

"Cancer isn't contagious."

"You already said you don't have cancer." He rolled his eyes. They stopped at the bottom. "Is this a Snuggie?"

"Uh huh," said Richie. "Want to share?"

"Fuck off."

"*Nobody loves me,*" Richie sang, a little louder. "*Everybody hates me. Guess I'll go eat everything.*"

## 5. Chapter 5

Richie covered up his white hair with Clairol Nice 'n Easy in Brown Black, because it smelled nicer than Just for Men, and gendered marketing was for schmucks.

He covered up everything else with drinking. It was a catchall: poor impulse control, memory problems, confusion, aggression, depression, mood swings, cognitive issues, and loss of motor skills.

The seizures were harder to hide. They were subclinical and nonconvulsive, but Eddie started threatening him with therapy if he kept staring off into space.

Eddie had done a lot of research before starting full fidelity Dialectical Behavior Therapy. He went twice a week— once for individual and once for group.

DBT was different than the kind of therapy Richie had once been mandated by the court. DBT was psychoeducational, so it was more like college, except the teachers actually cared about your mental health. There were four modules: Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotional Regulation, and Interpersonal Communication. Eddie was on Distress Tolerance. It seemed to be working, if the amount of time he'd been spending with Richie was anything to go by.

Traditional therapy was about the Why. Which neuron was firing blanks. Which parent diddled you as a toddler. DBT was about the How. How to get better. How to change. That was the titular dialectical: change versus acceptance.

Eddie said it was a lot like the Serenity Prayer.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*Courage to change the things I can,*

*And wisdom to know the difference.*

Richie had never heard that version before.

Eddie's office in LA was a lot more relaxed than its NYC counterpart. He could work from home most of the week. Richie pretended to do the same, while really browsing Ugly Renaissance Babies on Tumblr. He had fired Bobby. By text. Then put his phone on silent. If any of the Losers needed him, they could text Eddie.

Sometimes, Richie texted them on Eddie's phone, and let them guess who it was. They always did.

He was texting Ben a particularly Ugly Renaissance Baby when the seizure hit.

His throat seized up first. It felt like every muscle in his body tightened. Like he was doing Eddie's progressive muscle relaxation, but he forgot the relaxation part. He couldn't move. He couldn't talk. He couldn't even close his eyes, so he saw every microexpression on Eddie's face when he walked into the room.

"Is that my ph— Richie?"

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*Courage to change the things I can,*

*And forgiveness when I finally snap.*

"Richie?"

DBT couldn't grant forgiveness, but body disposal usually required some Distress Tolerance.

Richie knew this from experience.

*God, grant me—*

One day his throat would close for good, and Eddie would probably find his body.

Good thing he was in therapy.

"Richie!"

*God—*

## 6. Chapter 6

"Rich!"

The first time, Richie got all the way to the Kissing Bridge.

"Rich!"

The second time, he got all the way to L.A.

"Hey, Rich! Wake up!"

The third time, he got a fucking clue.

"Yeah, yeah! There he is, buddy! Hey, Richie, listen."

Of course, it helped to have Stan explain everything like he was a three-year old.

"I think I got it man. I think I killed It! I did!"

That was how Stan always talked to Richie. It was comforting. He was surprisingly comforting for a ghost. Then Richie stopped crying and started listening.

"I think I killed it for re—"

There was no point leaving the cistern when Richie would end up back on his back, looking up at Eddie, haloed by the fading Deadlights, like an angel or a dentist.

Eddie was supposed to die in this universe. Pennywise was using the temporal properties of the Deadlights to taunt Richie with a future that he couldn't save them from.

Maturin made the vision loop, gave Richie a chance to practice, so he could get it right in real life. Maturin didn't believe it was possible, but he was old, and old people never believed like kids did.

"He keeps calling me 'my child'," said Stan, in that deadpan of his. Deadpan Stan. He would always be Richie's straight man.



"You are a child compared to me," said Maturin, like they weren't waiting for the level to reload so Richie could relive his worst nightmare for the fourth time in a row.

"Listen to me," said Stan. He got down on the ground next to Richie and what was left of Eddie. "We don't have long. Maturin is using the last of his power to do this. It's a favor, in exchange for killing Pennywise. You know how to do that. You just have to figure out how to save Eddie."

"I can't!" Richie started crying again, tears cutting tracks in the dirt and the blood, but it was just Stan.

"Yes, you can. You can save him. You can save yourself. Listen to me, Richie. This is important. Being in the Deadlights this long— It's not good for you. Only Bev made it out untouched, and we all know she's the strongest of us. It drove Bowers crazy. Me too. That's why I killed myself. My wife's going to send you some letters, but I was just trying to make the rest of the Losers feel better about it. You need to know. It wasn't... honorable. Suicide is never honorable."

Richie always thought the idea of death with honor was kind counterintuitive considering most people shit themselves when they die.

"If anything, my death just gave him more ammunition to use against you," said Stan. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Richie."

"It wasn't your fault," said Richie. He didn't know what the fuck was going on, but he knew that much. Stan was the best of them. Bev may have been the strongest, but Stan was definitely the best.

Stan hung his head, even though he wasn't the one crying. "Yes, I do. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did that to you. Don't do that to Eddie."

"What?"

"You're going to save him, but you're going to be fucked up from the Deadlights." Stan grabbed Richie's shoulders. "The longer you stay in, the worse it will get. The Deadlights drive you crazy, but eventually the damage will go beyond psychological."

"I don't care," said Richie.

"Maybe not now, but you will. Eddie definitely will. Let him take care of you. Promise me, Richie."

"I— How? How do I save him?"

"You must discover that on your own," said Maturin. It was hard to look at him. He was all bright light and big mouth.

"Are you related to the sloppy bitch?" asked Richie.

The Neibolt House began to collapse in on itself. Stan was still holding Richie's shoulders. He shook them a little, and Richie tried to look at him. It was even harder than looking at Maturin.

"I'm sorry, Stan," he said. Richie still didn't know what the fuck was going on, but he knew that much. He was the worst of them.

"It wasn't your fault," said Stan, that same deadpan.

A rock hit Richie in the face, grinding his glasses into his eyes, and it wasn't exactly painless, but it was less painful than the alternative.

"Rich!"

## 7. Chapter 7

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter contains graphic descriptions of violence.

When Richie came to, Eddie was talking, low and soft, because of course he knew the emergency treatment for subclinical seizures.

They were sitting on the couch, but they weren't touching. The coffee table was pulled back, so it wouldn't be a tripping hazard. The Amphigorey had fallen off and open to The Doubtful Guest. Richie laughed.

Eddie stopped talking, and started touching. First was a hand on Richie's forehead—the back of his hand, like he was checking for a fever. Richie was pretty sure it gave him a fever. Then there were palms running down his shoulders, rubbing his upper arms, as if Eddie had somehow found him too cold.

He looked at Richie with those unnecessarily-large eyes, like an X-ray machine, penetrating and dangerous in high doses.

"You're really dying."

"Eds—"

"Shut up!"

"Wow," Richie tried a smile on for size but stopped when it didn't fit. "I know you don't like the nickname, but—"

"Are you really...?" Eddie seemed to be having trouble finishing his sentence, which was a first for him. Usually, he finished other people's sentences for them. Usually Richie's.

"I think so," Richie whispered. "I don't know. It's a... It's the Deadlights. I was in them too long."

"But Bev was in the Deadlights for longer than you were." Eddie was

trying not to cry.

"No, she wasn't."

"It was just a few minutes, Richie." Eddie had stopped trying not to cry, and now he was just trying to hide it from Richie.

"Yeah." He swept his thumb across Eddie's cheekbone. "No. It was a loop. Sometimes I was in the loop for a few minutes. Sometimes for a few days."

Eddie knocked his hand away, but then he grabbed it and didn't let go. "How many times?"

1. He warned Eddie about the claw about to impale him.

Eddie said, "What did you—"

2. He rolled them over, so Pennywise would stab him instead.

The claw went through them both.

3. He pushed Eddie to the side and accidentally cracked his skull open on a rock.

Richie read this comic once about Chip from Beauty and the Beast: "Mama, now that the curse is broken, do we get to be human again? Oh, boy! Is... Is that my brain?"

He threw up until the cycle restarted.

4. He grabbed Eddie in a bear hug and rolled them both, all the way down to the base of the cistern, like Ben, rolling down the Barrens.

That actually worked, until Eddie started taunting Pennywise and got himself bit in the face. Richie wondered if his exposure to the Deadlights would result in some sort of Inception-style meta-hallucination, but when the cycle restarted, it looked like the same hellscape as always.

Richie seriously considered the possibility that he had died, and this was his own personal hell, but there would be more Game of War

ads.

5. Bear hug, roll, keep Eddie behind him. Pennywise attacks from the opposite direction.

6. Bear hug, roll, corral Eddie into a cavern. Leave him behind to battle Pennywise. Return to find Eddie's face crushed in by a falling rock. It was lodged in the middle, like those bowling balls they drop on mattresses to show how soft they are. A few springs were poking out.

At least, by then, Richie knew it was a pretty painless death.

Every time Eddie died, he restarted the cycle. It was usually easiest to do nothing. By the time Eddie died, nothing was just about all Richie could do.

7...

It took him twenty-four more tries, even though Stan had given him the answer after three.

"How many times, Rich?"

"Too many. But that was my fault, though." Eddie didn't need to know most of what had gone on in the Deadlights, but he had to know that much. "I took too long to figure it out. It was— It wasn't like what Bev saw. It was more like virtual reality, I guess. Complete with the simulator-sickness. Bobby got me an Oculus Rift for Christmas last year, and I had to wipe the headsets down with Clorox between levels. He thought I could use it to take a 'virtual vacation.' You know, so I wouldn't take a real one? It just wasn't the same. Mostly because everything smelled like Clorox." Richie took off his glasses and set them on the coffee table. He was legally blind without them, but sometimes that was a relief. That thought always made him feel guilty. Real blind people didn't have a choice. "I didn't know the first loop was— that it wasn't real."

"I know you saw me die," said Eddie. They were still whispering, like there was anything lurking in the shadows anymore. "I could feel it. I was supposed to die. That claw— I still don't know how you did it."

"I didn't," said Richie. "Stan did."

"Stan?"

"It had to be all seven of us," said Richie. "Lucky seven. We had some help, though."

Stan's first encounter with Pennywise had been early that summer, not long after the last day of school. A voice called to Stan from inside the Standpipe, claiming it belonged to the "dead ones." He got out by repeating bird names, like he was trying to kill a boner or something.

He was hesitant to talk about it at first, but Richie's complete irreverence for personal boundaries had eventually won him over.

The "dead ones" were all the children who had drowned in the Standpipe. All the children who, like Stan, wouldn't stop floating until Pennywise was underground for good.

Like Georgie, who always liked Richie best, after Bill, because Richie told the best jokes. He even remembered to keep them PG in front of Georgie. Most of the time.

Old people never believed like kids did.

And Georgie had been a kid for twenty-seven years.

So Richie called them.

It had been so long since anyone called them, most of them actually came. Some of them were dressed like extras from *The Crucible*. Some were in their Easter best. There was a grown man in a beaver hat, but he looked motherfucking pissed, so Richie stayed out of his way. There was Eddie Corcoran, and Betty Ripsom, and Cheryl Lamonica, and Veronica Grogan. There was Patrick Hockstetter.

Richie never thought he'd be asking Patrick for help— Patrick fucking Hockstetter, with his shit talking and lip licking. He made sure Richie never felt like the only gay person in Derry. Even in the cistern, it made him shiver, but Richie could swallow his pride. It went down easier than Eddie's blood.

## 8. Chapter 8

Eddie kept touching Richie, who didn't have the self-control to stop him. Richie had been just as clingy after Neibolt (until they got to the Bangor International Airport, when he dropped Eddie's hand said, "Bang her? I barely know her!") The least he could do was let Eddie cop his own feel and try not to enjoy it too much.

"We you even going to tell us?" Eddie's fingers were curled in Richie's curls.

"Why would I?" He cocked his head like Ben's dog, so Eddie wouldn't get a cramp in his wrist.

"Then why did you?"

"I didn't mean to," said Richie. "I'm sorry."

Eddie glared at the Amphigorey. "I'm not mad at you for telling me! I'm mad at you for not telling me!"

"I'm getting a lot of mixed messages here."

"Well, you should be used to that!"

"What?"

"Nothing." Eddie blew a breath out, like he was trying to make a very serious birthday wish. "We should tell the other losers. They might be able to— Mike—"

"They can't do anything," said Richie. He straightened, and shook his head, looking more like Mr. Brown than ever.

The dog's real name was Poncho, because Ben had misremembered Pongo's name from 101 Dalmatians, but it didn't matter after Beverly nicknamed him Mr. Brown. Sometimes, she called him, Mr. Shit. He answered to exactly none of these names.

He was a big black brown mongrel with white circles under his eyes, like the inverse of Richie's black bags. Richie had special ordered him

treats from Pet So Chic in Paris just so he could be the favorite uncle. Competition was fierce.

Eddie immediately laid hands on his arm. Both hands, twisting slightly, like he was giving Richie the softest Indian Burn ever.

"They can fucking—"

"What?" asked Richie. "Say goodbye? Trust me. It's overrated."

He had told Eddie everything that happened in the cistern, all twenty-seven times, with some minor content edits. One thing Eddie didn't need to know was how he looked with his brains dripping from his sweatshirt hood, like pasta water from a colander.

"We don't know for sure you're—"

"I know."

"How?"

"I just do."

"Rich—"

"Eds."

Maybe he was sticking to single words because Richie kept interrupting him. It would have been a better strategy against someone who hadn't spent the majority of their adolescence telling Interrupting Cow jokes.

Richie sighed. "It started with some memory loss. Not the— that kind. Dizzy spells. Poor coordination. I mean, more than usual. I went to the doctor. They asked me if I'd been hit in the head recently. I said yes, and they ran some tests. Then they asked if I'd been hit in the head more than once."

"You do make a lot of bad jokes," said Eddie, and Richie let out a grateful laugh.

"There's something called CTE. I don't remember what it stands for,



but—"

"Chronic traumatic encephalopathy." Eddie was paler than Richie had seen him in real life.

Richie shrugged. "I like the old-fashioned name better. Except I always thought 'punch drunk' was about getting drunk off punch. Usually only athletes and veterans get it, but Dr. Andretta wanted to run some more tests, just in case."

"I thought CTE could only be diagnosed..."

"Postmortem." Richie nodded. "Yeah. No. There's a new technique using a PET scan and some sort of tracing chemical."

Richie had been given pants, a gown, and hospital socks with treads on both the top and the bottom in case he got confused. Only his head went into the machine, which sounded like a computer trying to connect to dial-up. It would have been boring even if the sound hadn't automatically made him impatient. When it was over, he stole the socks.

"It's definitely CTE, but... Usually, these sorts of symptoms would take years to manifest. I got them a week before the seizures started."

Dr. Andretta had tried to sign him up for medical studies, the Brain Donation Registry, probably the next BODY WORLDS tour. Richie felt like the biggest jerk since his days slinging soda at Derry Drug's soda counter (the only town that still had soda jerks after 1958), but he was pretty sure he would only skew their results.

He couldn't even donate his liver.

"It's okay," said Richie. "I—"

Eddie started crying again, and Richie suddenly remembered who had taught him the Interrupting Cow joke.

## 9. Chapter 9

Richie forgot to take his Celexa. He forgot to check his Eddie's phone for texts from the other Losers. He forgot to eat. When Bobby stopped by the apartment, Richie thought it was a B&E, which only made things marginally more awkward than they already were. The only thing he never forgot were the Losers, so at least God had a sense of humor.

Then again, he was a turtle.

Eddie had agreed not to tell the other Losers anything without Richie's express permission. Richie had thought he was lying, but so far, only Bobby had tried to break down his door.

Bobby was now operating under the belief that Richie had suffered a stroke. He thought it was a joke at first. The tremors, the slur, the unsteady gait. Richie's dizziness had become so omnipresent that he could barely walk under his own power. He leaned on Eddie more often than not.

He forgot to lean on Eddie when he tried to get the aluminum bat from his bedroom, and the six inch gash in his forehead was what finally convinced Bobby to leave. Eddie's yelling might have had something to do with it.

Richie never forgot the Losers, but one day, he did forget that Stan was dead. Eddie tried to hide his tears. It wasn't his fault his eyes were so big.

Richie had the pills all lined up before he remembered how Stan had died.

He couldn't do that to Eddie, but he couldn't keep doing this to Eddie either.

"I wanna' die," he said, one day at breakfast. Richie was pretty sure it was breakfast. They ate Cheerios for most meals, but Eddie looked a little less tired than usual.

Well, he *had* looked a little less tired than usual.

"Richie—"

"No," said Richie. "I'mma' die anyway. Might's'well get it over with. I worked out my will witha'lawyer. You get everything, on the condition that you make the other Losers compete for their share. You getta' choose the competition, but I was picturing some American Ninja Warrior shit."

It was the most Richie had said in almost a week. The barely-there slur sent him nonverbal most days. Richie didn't know why, but it reminded him of the version of himself in the Doll Room at Neibolt. Mouth sewn shut. That was what it felt like. He could speak; it would just hurt a lot.

Eddie didn't mind. They could communicate well enough without words. One of Eddie's caterpillar-like eyebrows would arch halfway through *Home Alone 22*, and Richie would know he was thinking about how Ben looked like Santa Clause when he smiled, no matter what size he was. It was their rosy cheeks, the luses. The angle would change, and Richie could practically hear the rebuke. *If anyone's a lush, it's you*. He was half-convinced Eddie's eyebrows were sentient. The other half was convinced Richie had hallucinated the entire exchange, at least until Eddie started humming, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

The Losers were coming to LA in two months, if only because Eddie and Richie had refused to go anywhere else. It was the first Losers Reunion, and Eddie had no idea what to do about it.

Richie did. He grabbed some papers from the Drawer of Inappropriate Starches, wiped off the Cheetos crumbs, and passed the stack to Eddie.

Richie had been spending a lot of time at the hospital lately, mostly at Eddie's insistence. Test and retests and a few trips that seemed to be just for fun. He hadn't eaten that much Jell-O since he was ten.

By the time Richie hit middle school, Maggie Tozier had gone through so many diet phases that she ran out of normal Jell-O recipes

(i.e. shots). Then she found a copy of the *Betty Crocker Good and Easy Cookbook* at Derry's only Goodwill. It included a dish called Pacific Lime Mold, which actually managed to taste worse than it sounded. Richie took a sick day to burn the cookbook and then another one when Maggie found a second copy on eBay. On the bright side, they both lost a bunch of weight from the food poisoning.

Pacific Lime Mold was just the gateway recipe to Boola-Boola Soup.

*Mix together 1 can each of turtle soup and green pea soup. Heat and add sherry flavoring to taste. Top with a spoonful of whipped cream. 4 servings.*

Richie had asked the librarian, Barbara Starrett, about Boola-Boola Soup. She didn't understand it any better than he did, but together they learned that it was named after the fight song of Yale University. They found a short film of Kim Novak dancing to the song with really big... pompons, and Richie had pretended to be more interested than he was.

He preferred the Undertaker, another cheer written by Allan M. Hirsh. The Undertaker was a mournful wail that went around the stadium like the Wave. Fans used it to unsettle the opposing team.

Richie didn't stick around to watch Eddie read the informational pamphlet for California's End of Life Option Act.